

THE

British Empire League.

OFFICES AT

BOTOLPH HOUSE, EASTCHEAP, E.C.

(C. FREEMAN MURRAY, Secretary).

Report of Speech

BY

THE RIGHT HON. JOSEPH CHAMBERLAIN, M.P.,

At the Canada Club Dinner

ON

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 25th, 1896.

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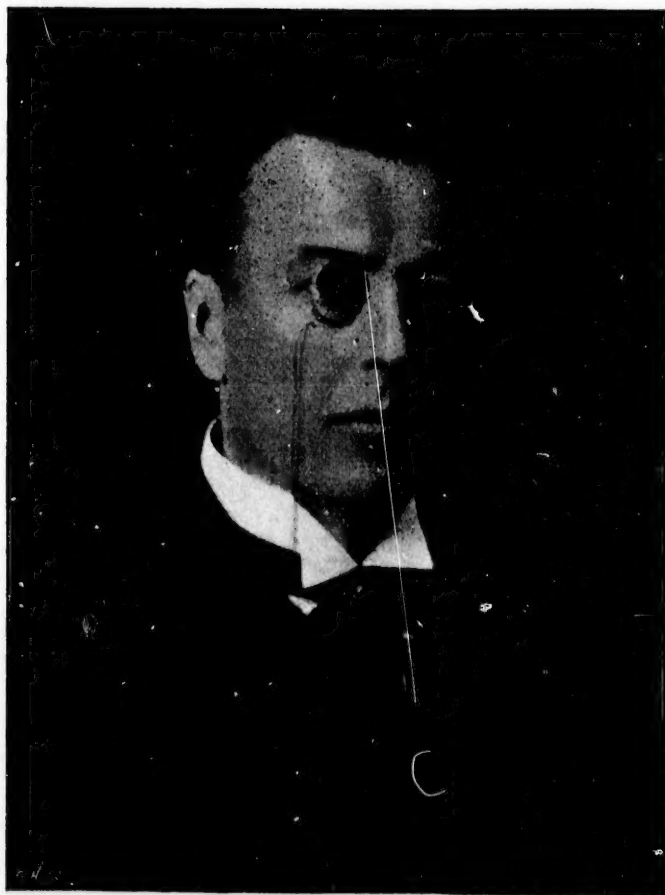
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J. Chamberlain

MR. CHAMBERLAIN

ON

“A ZOLLVEREIN FOR THE EMPIRE.”

THE recent speech of The Right Hon. J. Chamberlain, M.P., to the Canada Club, being the leading official pronouncement on one of the principal subjects specified in the Constitution of the British Empire League, the Executive Committee have thought it desirable to reprint for the use of the members an authentic report of this speech, with Mr. Chamberlain's sanction.

They do not thereby commit the League to any present opinion on the important proposition set out by Mr. Chamberlain for general consideration : but as the members of the League are specially interested, and may not improbably take part, in the discussion which it is desired to elicit, it has appeared opportune to supply the speech in a convenient form to the League.

SPEECH BY THE RIGHT HON. JOSEPH CHAMBERLAIN, M.P.

MR. CHAMBERLAIN, who on rising to respond to the toast of “The Governor-General (the Earl of Aberdeen) and the Dominion of Canada,” was received with prolonged cheers, said :—“ Mr. President and Gentlemen,—I feel honoured in being associated in this toast with Dr. Montague, a member of the Ministry and of the Parliament of Canada, and I have much pleasure in meeting so many representatives of that great Dominion, which, whether we have regard to the area of its territory, to its population, to its natural resources, or to any other test by which we gauge the greatness of a people, stands to-day first among the group of kindred nations which together with

the United Kingdom form the British Empire. (Cheers.) I have on two occasions had the pleasure of visiting Canada, and I have had the opportunity of making the acquaintance of many of her leading statesmen, and notably of the late Sir John Macdonald, that most Imperially-minded man (cheers), whose guiding idea throughout his long political life was to maintain intact the local independence of Canada in close alliance with the mother country. (Cheers.) I think that at times he had no easy task. (Hear, hear.) There were prominent men on both sides of the Atlantic who at one time assumed that the manifest destiny of Canada was to be absorbed into the great Republic on its southern frontier. ("No, no"; "Never.") That was the opinion. (Hear, hear.) It is an ancient controversy, and I do not think it necessary to refer to it to-night except to mark the contrast between the doubt and hesitation of those days and the determination now of every son of Canada to maintain his local institutions, his separate identity, and at the same time to draw closer the bonds which unite him to the great parent State. ("Hear, hear," and cheers.)

CANADIAN LOYALTY.

The recent isolation of the United Kingdom, the dangers which seemed to threaten us, have evoked from all our colonies, and especially from Canada, an outburst of loyalty and affection which has reverberated throughout the world, which has had a great effect, and which testifies to a sentiment that is deeper than words can express. (Cheers.) We have been told by cynics that these expressions of loyalty and affection are superfluous—that they are the ornaments of after-dinner oratory ("No, no"), but that they would not bear the test and trial of serious conflict, that if a war should ever arise the mother country would be left to her fate ("No, no"), and that the colonies would take care of themselves. That idea, at any rate, must have been dispelled by what has recently happened. (Hear, hear.) The shadow of war did darken the horizon, and to none of her Majesty's subjects was that shadow more ominous than it was to our fellow citizens in Canada; but there was no hesitation, although, if that had happened which would have been abhorrent to all of us, the brunt in the first instance would have fallen on Canada. A unanimous voice went up from the people and Parliament of Canada to say that this matter, although it did not directly affect their interests, yet affected the honour of the British Empire, and they made common cause with us. (Cheers.) They were prepared to stand shoulder to shoulder and to bear their share in all the evils that might come upon us. Their decision was emphasized in

the debate to which you, Mr. President, have referred, which took place recently in the Dominion Parliament, and the moral of which was summed up in the conclusion of the eloquent speech of Mr. M'Neill, the mover of a loyal and patriotic resolution, when he said,—“The British people are one people, animated by one spirit, and determined to stand together as one man in defence of their common rights and in the maintenance of their common interests.” (“Hear, hear,” and cheers.) “We desire peace before all, we regard war with horror, but we are prepared to accept it with all its consequences, come from what quarter it may, if it be necessary to do so in order to defend the honour and the integrity of our own Empire.” (Cheers.) I call your attention to the last words of the orator. He speaks of “our own Empire,” and he struck the right chord, for the Empire of Great Britain is the common heritage of all her sons, and is not the appanage of the United Kingdom alone. (Cheers.) Now, in the course of that debate many speeches were made all to the same effect, and the resolution was unanimously passed with acclamation.

IMPERIAL FEDERATION.

But again and again allusion was made to the opportunity, to the occasion, which every well-wisher to the unity of the Empire was bound to seize, and a hope was expressed that something might be done to bring us nearer together. Sir, we share that hope. (“Hear, hear,” and cheers), and I ask you now, gentlemen, is this demonstration, this almost universal expression of loyalty from all our Colonies, to pass away without a serious effort upon the part both of colonial and Imperial statesmen to transform these high sentiments into practical results? (Cheers.) I have, at any rate, thought that it was my duty the first time I had the opportunity of speaking at least to call attention to the position of this great question, which has been before us now for a good number of years, which has appealed strongly to the sentiments of the people, but which has not up to the present time resulted in anything like a practical scheme. In the year 1884 a league was formed—the Imperial Federation League—under the most favourable auspices. The late Mr. Forster was its president, and it afterwards enjoyed the assistance of a long series of distinguished statesmen and prominent personages; but two years ago it was dissolved without having accomplished its object, unless, indeed, its chief object was the education of public opinion to the importance of the subject. Sir, I think that we may, at all events, learn from its experience that the realization of our hopes, if they are in the direction of a federation of the Empire—their final

realization—is a matter of such vast magnitude and such great complication that it cannot be undertaken at the present time. But it does not follow that on that account we should give up our aspirations. (Hear, hear.) It is only a proof that we must approach the goal in a different way, that we must not try to do everything all at once, that we must seek the line of least resistance. To create a new government for the British Empire—a new government with large powers of taxation and legislation over countries separated by thousands of miles of sea, in conditions as various as those which prevail in our several dependencies and colonies—that, indeed would be a duty from which the boldest statesman might shrink appalled. We may, however, approach this desirable consummation by a process of gradual development. (Hear, hear.) We may bear in mind the words of an old poet—that

“No vast design was ever snatched in haste ;

“’Tis patience heaves it on.”

(Cheers.)

COMMON INTERESTS AND OBLIGATIONS.

We may endeavour to establish common interests and common obligations. When we have done that it will be natural that some sort of representative authority should grow up to deal with the interests and the obligations we have created. What is the greatest of our common obligations ? It is Imperial defence. What is the greatest of our common interests ? It is Imperial trade. (Hear, hear.) And those two are very closely connected. It is very difficult to see how you can pretend to deal with the great question of Imperial defence without having first dealt with the question of Imperial trade. Imperial defence is largely a matter of ways and means, and ways and means are dependent upon the fiscal and other commercial arrangements you may make ; and, therefore, the conclusion to which I arrive is this—that if the people of this country and the people of the colonies mean what they have been saying, and if they intend to approach this question of Imperial unity in a practical spirit, they must approach it on its commercial side.

THE EXAMPLE OF THE GERMAN EMPIRE.

We have a great example before us in the creation of the German Empire. How was that brought about ? You all recollect that, in the first instance, it commenced with the union of two of the States which now form that great Empire in a commercial Zollverein. They attracted the other States gradually—were joined by them for commercial purposes. A council, a Reichsrath, was formed to deal

with those commercial questions. Gradually in their discussions national objects and political interests were introduced, and so, from starting as it did on a purely commercial basis and for commercial interests, it developed until it became a bond of unity and the foundation of the German Empire. We have another reason why we should approach this subject from its commercial side, and that is that in regard to this the colonies, to whose feelings we must pay the utmost deference, who must, in fact, in one sense at any rate, take the initiative in any movement, have clearly pointed by their action to commercial union as the point upon which, as they consider, the whole subject is most ripe. Why, what happened at the great conference at Ottawa which was held in 1894? The principal resolution—principal, at all events, in regard to its importance—which was passed at that conference, was in the following terms:—"That this conference records its belief in the advisability of a Customs arrangement between Great Britain and her colonies, by which trade within the Empire may be placed upon a more favourable footing than that which is carried on with foreign countries." (Cheers.) It is quite true that that was the declaration of a general principle, and that no definite plan was submitted to or adopted by the conference, but we have other means of information. We are acquainted with the speeches that were made there, and we know what was in the minds of the delegates. I observed in *The Times* this morning a telegram from Canada which tells us that Mr. McNeill, the gentleman who moved the patriotic resolution to which I have already referred, has moved another resolution in the House of Commons of Canada, by which he proposes to declare that it is desirable in the interests of Great Britain and of the colonies that a moderate *ad valorem* duty, independent of any existing duty, should be imposed both by the colonies and by the mother country upon all imports from foreign countries. (Cheers.) That, therefore, is the suggestion, for I will call it no more, it is not a formal proposition, but it is the suggestion that has been made to us by our colonies for carrying out a system of commercial union. At any rate a proposition of that kind is entitled to respectful consideration, and if we object to it, we ought, I think, to propose an alternative, or we ought—and this is the only other thing for us to do—to say at once that all that we have said, all that we have done, all that we have thought about Imperial unity has been thrown away and that that idea must be abandoned as an empty dream. Now, Sir, do not let us minimize the proposition we are asked to consider. It would involve in the case of the United Kingdom a most serious disturbance of our trade; it would be a great change

in the principles which for many years past have guided our commercial policy. It involves the imposition of a duty, it may be a small, but it is a duty upon food and upon raw material, and whatever may be the result of imposing such a duty as to which, if I had time, I could discourse for many minutes—whatever may be the actual result—the tendency is to increase the cost of living which would increase the pressure upon the working-classes of this country (No, no and hear, hear), and it would also have a tendency to increase the cost of production, which would put us, of course, in a worse position than now in competition with foreign countries in neutral markets.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE PROPOSAL.

I see no use in shutting my eyes to the consequences of the proposition (cheers), which I desire to consider with an impartial mind. The first thing is to establish the facts, and the facts are as I have stated. In return, under this proposal we should get a small, and a very small, consideration in the shape of a preference of, it may be 2 per cent., it might even be 5 percent., in our competition with foreign manufactures in the colonial market. Now, what, then, is the proposal we are asked to consider? It is a very startling proposal for a free-trade country (hear, hear), and I say that in its present form it is a proposal which it is impossible for us to adopt. (Cheers.) I do not say that merely because a proposal of this kind is contrary to free-trade principles, because although I am myself a convinced free-trader in the sense of believing that the theory is undoubtedly the theory on which the world would become most prosperous, yet I have not such a pedantic admiration for it that, if sufficient advantage were offered to me, I would not consider a deviation from the strict doctrine. (Hear, hear.) Mr. Cobden himself took this view, and compromised his principles in making the French treaty; and it cannot be expected that we, his disciples, should be more orthodox than the apostle of free trade himself. (Hear, hear, and laughter). But my point is that in the proposal and the suggestion which has hitherto been made there is not sufficient *quid pro quo*, the advantage offered is not enough to induce this country to take the certain loss and the possible risk which would be involved in revising altogether its present commercial policy. Having regard to the amount of the colonial duties which are at the present time levied upon British produce, it is evident that a fixed addition such as is suggested would be a much smaller preference in the case of goods going to the colonies than it would be in the case of goods coming from the colonies to this country. In the case of this country the preference is given on the present cost price of the goods, but in the colonies

the preference is only added to the cost of the goods *plus* the heavy duties now imposed. The percentage therefore would be much more in favour of the colonies than it would be in favour of the United Kingdom. (Hear, hear.) But the second point, which is much more important, is that our foreign trade is so gigantic in proportion to the foreign trade of the colonies that the burden of an arrangement of this kind would fall with much greater weight on the United Kingdom than upon our fellow-subjects in the colonies. I therefore think we may very fairly ask our fellow-subjects in the colonies to better their offer if, as I believe, they desire to proceed upon those lines, and if those lines do really offer the best direction in which we can proceed.

LORD RIPON'S DESPATCH.

The arguments I have used, and a good number of others with which I should not think of wearying you, have been very ably stated in an important despatch which was addressed by my predecessor, Lord Ripon, in 1895, to the Governors of all the colonies, and that despatch has been generally assumed to be an absolute negative to the proposals of the colonies. That is a mistake. That despatch is conclusive, in my opinion, as to the particular proposal which has up to the present time been suggested for our consideration, but it does not bar the door to other proposals, which, being more favourable, might receive a more favourable consideration. There is one passage in Lord Ripon's despatch, most important in my eyes, which somehow or other seems to have escaped general attention. It is a paragraph to this effect :—"The resolution (that is, the resolution of the Ottawa Conference) does not advocate the establishment of a Customs union comprising the whole Empire, whereby all the existing barriers to free commercial intercourse between the various members would be removed, and the aggregate Customs revenue equitably apportioned among the different communities. Such an arrangement " says Lord Ripon. "would be free in principle from objection, and, if it were practicable, would certainly prove effective in cementing the unity of the Empire and promoting its progress and stability." Now that is another suggestion. That is a suggestion of an alternative to the proposition which I have been considering; and I would like to be allowed, in order to make the course of my argument perfectly clear, to summarize what I have said to you upon this point.

FOUR PROPOSITIONS.

I have laid down four propositions which I think cannot be controverted. The first is that there is a universal desire among all the

members of the Empire for a closer union between the several branches, and that, in their opinion as in ours, this is desirable—nay, it is essential for the existence of the Empire as such. My second proposition is that experience has taught us that this closer union can be most hopefully approached in the first instance from its commercial side. My third proposition is that the suggestions which have hitherto been made to us, although we know them to have been made in good part, are, when considered from the point of view of British interests, not sufficiently favourable to be considered by this country. My fourth proposition is that a true Zollverein for the Empire, that a free trade established throughout the Empire, although it would involve the imposition of duties against foreign countries, and would be in that respect a derogation from the high principles of free trade and from the practice of the United Kingdom up to the present time, would still be a proper subject for discussion and might probably lead to a satisfactory arrangement if the colonies on their part were willing to consider it. (“Hear, hear,” and cheers.) It has been assumed, in Lord Ripon’s despatch and in many other documents, that the colonies must necessarily refuse to consider a proposition of this kind because it would interfere with the necessities of their revenue, that they are obliged to rely upon indirect taxation for the funds by which their Administration is carried on, and that they could not enter on such an agreement as this without providing way and means by methods which, at present at any rate, are altogether unpopular in many of our colonies. I am not convinced of the truth of that statement, and I want especially to point out that the advantages of such a proposal are so great to the colonies, as they would undoubtedly lead to the earliest possible development of their great natural resources, would bring to them population, would open to them the enormous market of the United Kingdom for their products, their food, their timber, their sugar—the advantages, I say, are so important that it appears to me that the colonies themselves would be bound to give to any suggestion, of this kind at all events, a careful reconsideration.

AN INDISPENSABLE CONDITION.

My second point is that we are dealing with an entirely exceptional state of things, and that we cannot, even if we wished, imitate exactly the German Zollverein. We are not conterminous countries; we are countries, as I have said, separated by thousands of miles, in some cases, and the circumstances of our different countries vary so considerably that it is evident that in any arrangement as to general free trade within the Empire exceptions must be made in the case of

articles that are chiefly taxed for revenue purposes. For instance, we cannot admit free trade in spirits or in tobacco, and to any gentleman who has any experience other articles will suggest themselves, which in one part of the Empire or another are the subject of strictly revenue duties, and might, by common agreement, be excluded from any such arrangement. But the principle which I claim must be accepted if we are to make any, even the slightest, progress is that within the different parts of the Empire protection must disappear, and that the duties must be revenue duties, and not protective duties in the sense of protecting the products of one part of the Empire against those of another part. It seems to me that if that principle were adopted there would be reason for calling a council of the Empire, calling representatives from the different States forming the Empire; and although the subject would be one of enormous difficulty and the greatest complication, still, with the good will that exists and the ultimate goal in view, I cannot but think that something like a satisfactory and a workable arrangement might be arrived at. (Cheers.) And although in such a case the principles of free trade would lose something in their application to the dealings between ourselves and foreign countries, advocates of free trade must remember how much they would gain by its extension to all the States which form the British Empire, States which are after all, whatever may be said of their present position, more likely to develop and increase in prosperity and population and wealth and power and commerce than any of the foreign States with which we have relations.

OUR ULTIMATE OBJECT.

Mr. President, I feel that I owe you some apology for dealing at such length with a subject which might be thought to be too serious for after-dinner oratory, but there is no doubt that we all feel that it is a subject of enormous importance, and I desire very much to call attention to it. I speak on this occasion for myself only. I want, not to lay down a course of policy which must be followed, but I want to provoke discussion—to provoke discussion in this country and to provoke discussion, above all, in the colonies; and if the details of such a subject as this are prosaic, at all events the ultimate aim that we have in view appeals to our highest sentiments of patriotism. To organize an empire—one may almost say to create an empire—greater and more potent for peace and the civilization of the world than any that history has ever known (cheers)—that is a dream if you like, but a dream of which no man need be ashamed. (Loud cheers.) We appreciate and we cordially respond

to the notes, the stirring notes, of loyalty and affection that have been evoked from our colonies when the great mother country has appeared to be in danger. We look forward with hope and with confidence to the development of those countries which are populated by our children and by our kinsmen. but these sentiments alone will never make an empire unless they are confirmed by bonds of material interest, and we can only found Imperial unity upon a common weal. (Cheers.) And so, if you will permit me, I will conclude in the words of a Canadian poet who, addressing the statesmen of the Dominion, said :—

“ Unite the Empire—make it stand compact.

“ Shoulder to shoulder let its members feel

“ The touch of British brotherhood ; and act

“ As one great nation—strong and true as steel.”

(Loud cheers.)

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